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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001875

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE MILITARY PREPARED BUT RESTRAINED IN
FACE OF SEPARATIST VIOLENCE

Classified By: Amb. Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Responding to increased attacks on civilians by radical hardliners allegedly linked to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the North Cotabato province of Mindanao, the Armed Forces of the Philippines have placed their forces on heightened alert and prepared a contingency plan to maintain peace and security in Mindanao in the event the attacks spill over into direct confrontation with the military. At the same time, some observers have accused local Philippine Armed Forces militia of fomenting violence, allegedly directed by local elected leaders who oppose the peace negotiations. With local tensions surrounding the peace process running high, the Philippine military has adopted a cautious posture in Mindanao, vowing to uphold the primacy of the peace talks between the government and the MILF. While the motive for the uncoordinated attacks that have displaced thousands of Mindanao residents remains unclear, the leadership of the Armed Forces has reiterated that it remains on "active defensive stance" against the insurgents, whose actions may be aimed at trying to disrupt upcoming elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Despite the discipline the Philippine forces have displayed, Army Chief Lieutenant General Victor Ibrado was firm in his resolve that his troops in Mindanao will not be "sitting ducks" and are prepared to take preventive action to ensure their safety. END SUMMARY.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

12. (C) Radical militants allegedly of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have attacked several villages in an area of North Cotabato province of central Mindanao over the last two weeks, displacing thousands of residents. The conflicted area could become part of the new Muslim political entity, an expanded Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), after local plebiscites a year from now as part of the current peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF. Anticipating a possible outbreak of violence in the run-up to ARMM elections on August 11, in July the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) prepared a contingency plan in the event the violence spilled over into direct confrontation with the military. The plan would be implemented only if open hostilities begin between the AFP and the MILF forces, and all action would have to be approved by the AFP Chief of Staff. According to the AFP, the operation would include transferring some Philippine troops currently on Jolo Island to Mindanao. The goal of the plan would be to disrupt quickly the command and control structure of MILF military units and isolate them from logistic support

in order to stop the violence and preserve the security, peace, and stability of the region.

A DELICATE BALANCE

13. (C) Although the contingency plan concept of operations is approved and in place, the AFP has taken an "active defensive posture" and shown no signs that it intends to break the ceasefire with direct action against MILF forces. While the motive for the MILF attacks remains unclear, their purpose could be consolidating their hold over areas that would be included in the expanded Muslim autonomous region. At the same time, local Philippine Armed Forces militia have been accused of harassing Muslim villages, allegedly at the direction of local elected leaders who oppose the peace negotiations. Local officials have expressed their frustration with the military's defensive stance, urging President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to replace the two Philippine generals in charge of the government's ceasefire committee and 6th Infantry Division, the latter of which has security responsibility for North Cotabato province. In the face of such criticism, military and government leaders continue trying to strike a delicate balance between maintaining peace and order and disrupting the ongoing peace talks.

14. (C) Privately, Chief of the Armed Forces General Alexander Yano has told Embassy officials that the military would do everything in its power to keep the peace in

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Mindanao and on August 5 he publicly called for sobriety on all sides saying. "We should be calm and reasonable, allowing the peace mechanisms to resolve contentious issues," Yano said. The recent attacks on villages by MILF hardliners have strained the ceasefire between the government and the MILF, which has been in place since July 2003. Both MILF and Philippine officials have publicly expressed their concern over the hostilities, but cautioned against rash action. Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro said government troops have avoided clashing with MILF forces because they know their overall objective is to attain peace in strife-torn Mindanao. Remarking on the military's defensive posture, Teodoro lauded the troops: "Our soldiers have shown admirable restraint and professionalism in the face of these hostilities," he said, while the MILF leadership repeatedly has said the attacks were not authorized by the MILF central committee.

MAINTAINING DISCIPLINE

15. (C) The clashes have been limited to a small area and only a few have directly involved Philippine troops. On August 4, suspected MILF units traded mortar fire with AFP units, but the exchange ended quickly and there were no casualties. An AFP spokesperson said the MILF rebels apparently had ignored orders from the MILF leadership to leave the area and that Philippine troops were moving to secure the afflicted villages.

16. (C) At the same time, Philippine military commanders are adamant that they will not allow soldiers to be "sitting ducks" should the attacks escalate into direct confrontation between their troops and the MILF forces. Philippine Army Chief Lieutenant General Ibrado said August 4 that the military would not hesitate to retaliate against MILF fighters if they stage an offensive against government troops, but he added the Armed Forces would "not necessarily attack," as there were "preventive actions" the military could take. Ibrado said the guidance to all troops in the field was to "exercise more patience and uphold the primacy of the peace process."

COMMENT

17. (C) The Philippine military's efforts to instill reform and discipline in the Armed Forces is paying dividends in the current difficult environment, as commanders in Mindanao are showing their troops to be above the political fray swirling around the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Wary of being blamed for a break in the ceasefire with the MILF, Philippine commanders have refrained from answering calls by some Mindanao leaders to engage alleged MILF radicals plundering local villagers. Despite public criticism from some elected officials for failure to subdue the hardliners, which in the past might have spurred the Philippine military to action, its troops remain in a firm defensive posture. However, the same reform that has led to greater discipline among Philippine forces has also given them the tools to conduct methodical contingency planning in the event that open hostilities break out between government forces and MILF militants. Whether or not those plans are needed depend on both sides ability to keep the peace. END COMMENT.

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